

Louise I. Carbert, *Agrarian Feminism: The Politics of Ontario Farm Women* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1995).

Is there some movement afoot in the Ontario countryside similar to the agrarian socialism that American sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset charted nearly a half century ago? The answer from political scientist Louise Carbert is sadly no, but she tries to make the best of the small number of rural women that can properly be called feminists. In the end she concludes that self-identified tags may not provide the best guide to diversity among Ontario farm women.

The word "feminist" has become value-laden, something that is frequently used in the pejorative at least among the young. This poses great difficulties for Carbert whose book essentially reports an analysis of an extensive questionnaire answered by 117 Ontario farm women engaged in agricultural commodity production. Carbert uses feminism interchangeably with "women's liberation movement" and "women's movement," although all lack precision; women's liberation was a slogan for a momentary revolt in North America that erupted in the 1970s and then vanished just as fast.

Words are more important to this study than its author cares to consider because her work is essentially an attitudinal survey. Even more fundamental to its credibility is the sample on which it is based. In order to secure women who would co-operate with an elaborate inquiry, Louise Carbert was unable to select her subjects randomly or systematically. Working through local notables in Grey and Huron counties in southern Ontario, she identified her sample through contacts. The result was a majority in the survey who were members of the Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario and a minority who were not, although the criterion of being involved in farm production cut across both segments. Due to the ethnic composition of the Ontario counties she selected, Carbert developed a sample that represented those of British and Irish ancestry disproportionately to the province as a whole, or even to

its rural areas. Reliance on the Women's Institute network further skewed her sample towards women who were older and less well educated. These caveats need to be kept in mind as Carbert represents her sample as "farm women" when, in effect, the object of her book is only a small element of the 1% of the Canadian population that can be described in those terms.

Like Lipset, Carbert opens her study with an institutional framework, but unfortunately it does not work. She examines rural women's organizations since the late nineteenth century in an unconvincing attempt to differentiate between "old" farm women's movements and more recent ones. The contention fails because she herself is forced to admit that leaders "of the new farm women's movement articulate a discourse, alternatively called social, maternal, or relational feminism, like that usually associated with the old farm women's movement." (27) Obviously, *la plus ça change* ... Apart from the leadership, Carbert also reports that 37% of her sample showed no understanding of the concepts of left and right in political life.

While it is apparent that there is no earth shaking groundswell about to erupt among Ontario farm women, Carbert's study is useful in furthering our understanding of this decided minority. In the tradition of political sociology the author casts her net widely so that we can see the variety of roles that these women play in daily life and economic production. While much of the result simply confirms or extends what previous inquiries have found, this study provides a necessary corrective to the over hasty generalizations that frequently govern the thoughts of some historians. Most importantly, Carbert maintains that the dynamics of agricultural production make farm women the hub around which the wheel moves, but in contrast to her title, she finds her group to be conservative socially, to have high levels of church attendance, and to express what she terms as a folk ideology of conciliation that affirms the moral superiority of the center over the political extremes of left or right.

But what does this tell us? Even the author acknowledges the limitations inherent in attitudinal surveys, particularly one that was

as long and as involved as this, and where embarrassment or sheer fatigue colors an outcome that is then enshrined as an immutable percentage figure. With a command of the relevant literature, Carbert tries to place her results in a national and international context, but can this small group of selected Ontario farm women really be compared and contrasted with European women as a whole as indexed by Eurobarometer soundings?

Louise Carbert identifies adherence to equality as the root principle of feminism, even though such belief flies in the face of biology and the differing life cycles of the two sexes. On this measure only 23% of her sample affirmed themselves as feminists in being positive about feminist values such as equity with men, autonomy, and self-assertion. Interestingly, expression of such views was highest not where men and women worked together on the farm, but where men had lower education than their wives and where they also engaged in labour off the farm, leaving agricultural pursuits more fully in the hands of women. Educational levels for such women themselves dropped out of the equation.

A short chapter tackles the thorny problems surrounding the concept of "happiness" in marriage and the family. Here the ground is doubly difficult due to the tendency of respondents not to unburden themselves but to provide answers that they would like to see published. Carbert concludes that for farm women labour depresses status, but control over commodity sales does not necessarily bring feelings of greater self-worth. Role reversals, where husbands engaged in housework, do. The author is therefore forced into a position that argues against an urban capitalist model of dual careers for wife and husband or shared agricultural vocations; separate spheres better characterizes working and familial relations in agricultural southern Ontario, she maintains.

Carbert's conclusion reveals how slippery words and conceptual categories have become. Noting the disjunction between conventional political behavior and feminism has also been observed among urban women, she highlights the importance of mechanical work on the farm in effecting more egalitarian marriages. While farm women engaged in physical labour associated with commod-

ity production were unlikely to affirm feminist identification, Carbert concludes that "these women may be, unselfconsciously, the real agrarian feminists." (158)

Appearances are always deceptive. There is no incipient revolution brewing in the Ontario countryside, only a greater diversity of viewpoint and lifestyles than authors unfamiliar with this terrain generally admit.

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James Struthers, *The Limits Of Affluence: Welfare in Ontario, 1920-1970* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1994)

Social welfare emerged as one of the most controversial and significant issues in Canadian society during the twentieth century; it remains one of the most elusive. For this reason alone James Struthers' follow-up to his 1983 work *No Fault of Their Own: Unemployment and the Canadian Welfare State 1914-1940* (Toronto 1983), was eagerly anticipated by those working in the field. Whereas *No Fault of Their Own* established and defined the concept of social welfare in its formative period, *The Limits of Affluence* examines its evolution, taking into account the many diverse factors which shaped its development.

From the outset, social welfare encompassed more than mere economic considerations; it addressed constitutional issues, Dominion provincial relations, morality, the family, bureaucratic strategies, the status and roles of women, business interests, and the role of the federal government and the extent of its responsibilities to the industrial worker, to name but a few. Add to this heterogeneous mixture rapidly changing economic, social and political circumstances, and the elusive history of social welfare becomes understandable, if not excusable. Herein lies the significance of this